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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000010

FOR NEA/FO, NEA/IPA AND NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIA: DEMONSTRATIONS SPREAD AS ANGER GROWS
OVER GAZA

REF: A. TUNIS 002

[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 1256

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Popular anger over the Israeli military operations in Gaza continues to increase, especially as civilian casualties mount. This sentiment is both fueled by, and reflected in, local media coverage. Impromptu demonstrations have proliferated. Most have been quickly dispersed by the police. With schools back in session following the December holidays, there have been multiple attempts to hold demonstrations, primarily by high school students, but also on university campuses. The tenor of the slogans being chanted has become harsher, with some now explicitly anti-American and others directed at Egypt and moderate Arab states. The head of the Jewish community told the Ambassador that he was not concerned about anger being directed at Tunisia's Jewish population. Meanwhile, the Tunisian government has delivered to Egypt humanitarian assistance intended for Gaza. End Summary.

GOT Offers Humanitarian Assistance

[1](#)2. (C) The GOT on January 3 sent a military aircraft loaded with 16 tons of humanitarian assistance to Egypt for delivery to Gaza. According to a statement released by the Tunis-Afrique Press Agency, the plane carried medicine, foodstuff, blankets, and tents. The statement credited this initiative with "materializ(ing) President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's decision to dispatch aid, as a sign of solidarity with the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip who are living through hard conditions as a result of the Israeli aggressions." EmbOff heard "unofficially" from a contact with the Red Crescent that the humanitarian assistance has not yet reached the intended beneficiaries, since the Israelis have not opened the relevant crossing points. Meanwhile, according to that same contact, the blood drive announced by Ben Ali drew a "massive" number of donors. Blood donation centers stayed open until midnight on January 3 to accommodate them.

Demonstrations Proliferate

[1](#)3. (C) Reflecting continued -- and growing -- popular anger over the Israeli incursion and mounting civilian casualties, a number of demonstrations have continued to take place in the capital. Reports indicate that the slogans chanted have taken on a harsher, sometimes anti-American tone. Particular animus is also being directed at Egypt and other moderate Arab regimes:

-- According to Tunisian bloggers, approximately 1,000 lawyers affiliated with the Tunis branch of the Bar Association held an impromptu demonstration on January 6 in

downtown Tunis in front of the Court of First Instance. Among the slogans they chanted were: "Hey, dear Qassams, destroy Tel Aviv" and "American agents are partners in the aggression." Reflecting increased upset at moderate Arab governments, some were chanting, "Some Arab Governments are agents of Zionism" and "Hey, Egypt, Mother of the Universe, isn't Gaza a part of the universe?" Following the protest, the president of the Tunis Bar transmitted a written protest to the Ambassador (informal translation in para 5).

-- Several NGO's organized a solidarity day with Gaza on January 7. Participating groups included the National Bar Association, the Young Lawyers Association, the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate, and several medical organizations representing doctors and dentists.

-- In addition, Amnesty International's Tunisia Branch has announced a conference in solidarity with Gaza for January 10.

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, with schools back in session following the end-of-year holidays, there have been multiple reported incidents of impromptu (i.e., unauthorized) demonstrations throughout the country. (Note: It is illegal to hold a demonstration in Tunisia without a permit, and the GOT only issues such permits sparingly.) Most of these demonstrations have been organized by high school students and have been quickly broken up by the police. University students are in the middle of exams and are therefore not as active. Moreover, both uniformed and plain-clothes police are known to be stationed on all university campuses, providing a ready deterrent. Even so, there have been some attempts by university students to organize protests. Following is a sampling of recent student protests:

-- On January 6, students from the Faculty of Law at the University of Tunis Ariana campus demonstrated in front of the Saudi Embassy.

-- Students from the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of Tunis April 9 Campus in downtown Tunis held a short-lived demonstration on January 6.

-- Security forces on January 6 surrounded the campus of the University of Tunis- al Manar, preventing students from taking to the streets.

-- Students from the University of Sfax gathered on January 6 in front of the university dormitory on Airport Road, but police prevented them from holding a demonstration.

-- On January 5, students from two high schools in La Marsa, a northern suburb of Tunis where many Embassy families live, held a demonstration that lasted about 30 minutes before being broken up by the police. Students from Lycee Cite al-Hadiqa in the southern suburbs of Tunis also held a short-lived demonstration on that date.

-- In Tebourba, about 20 km west of Tunis, 700 students from Lycee Hannibal reportedly demonstrated. After police detained some of the demonstrators, others held a sit-in in front of the local police station.

-- In the Governorates of Nabeul, Kairouan, and Kelibia, students held short, impromptu demonstrations on January 5.

-- In the southeastern city of Zarzis, students held a two-kilometer march before police intervened, reportedly using tear gas to disperse the crowd. Also in Zarzis, police reportedly detained female students who were wearing the hijab and carrying Qurans, in emulation of Hamas demonstrators. They were later released after signing a commitment not to wear hijabs.

-- In the northwestern city of Bizerte, a student from Lycee Ali Bach Hamba was detained for a few hours after issuing a communique calling for a student demonstration.

-- In the southwestern mining region of Gafsa, police

prevented two different student demonstrations on January 5. Teaching staff called on students to stand up for half an hour in silence on January 7 to protest the Israeli "aggression" in Gaza.

Text of Tunis Bar Written Protest

15. (SBU) Following the January 6 demonstration held by the Tunis Bar Association, Embassy received by fax a message of protest from that organization to the Ambassador. Informal translation (from Arabic) follows:

Begin Text:

The lawyers who are members of the Tunis branch organized a protest today outside the House of Counsel to express their anger and rejection of the aggression against our people in Gaza over the past 11 days by the military machinery of the Zionist Entity that is occupying and pillaging Palestinian land with murder, terror, and destruction of their homes. Indeed, they consider that what the war machine is doing constitutes genocide under the related convention of 1948 and military aggression under UN Resolution 3314. They express shock at the biased US position, which has given the Zionist Entity a free hand to violate international peace and security in violation of UN conventions.

End Text

Local Jewish Community Not Targeted

16. (C) Ambassador met January 7 with Roger Bismuth, leader of the Tunisian Jewish community, to take the pulse of the local Jewish population. A prominent businessman and appointed Member of Tunisia's upper house of Parliament, Bismuth said popular anger had not been directed against Tunisian Jews. He noted that neither his synagogue nor his company had been on the receiving end of any Gaza-related disturbances. He also pointed out that, as a preventive measure, police had cordoned off the downtown Tunis synagogue during the January 1 GOT-authorized demonstration (Ref A). Bismuth credited President Ben Ali's December 30 statement as being moderate. He characterized, however, the sensational press coverage as "extreme," albeit on a par with some European press coverage.

Media Features Heart-Wrenching Photos;
Makes False Claims

17. (C) The Israeli ground offensive has only intensified the graphic, emotional coverage of events in Gaza in the Tunisian media. Reports featuring heart-wrenching photographs of bloodied children are featured in all the dailies, government and private, across the political spectrum. Stories continue to detail the "carnage" and "massacre" in Gaza. The ruling party and populist private dailies describe Israeli actions as "genocide" and "extermination" and laud continuing Hamas rocket attacks as "resistance." Populist daily Le Quotidien's front page headline on January 6 made the false claim that more than 500 Palestinians had been killed, "the majority of them children." Editorials criticize "tacit US agreement, European complicity, UN procrastination and the shameful silence of certain Arab regimes." Egyptian calls for Hamas to cease rocket attacks and for Arabs to have a more balanced position are met with incredulity. President Bush's most recent radio address is described as proof that the United States is "clearly biased towards Israel to the detriment of innocent Palestinian civilians" while President-elect Obama's silence is condemned as an implicit endorsement of Israeli actions.

The View from Pro-American Young Tunisians:

Disappointment

18. (C) Two young Tunisians, one of whom is a promising graduate of a MEPI Young Leaders program, asked to see Pol/EconCouns today to express their anger over the Israeli "aggression" and profound disappointment with US policy. As young Tunisians who identify with American values, they said they felt particularly "betrayed" by what they perceived to have been a US "blank check" to the Israeli military. They were willing to listen to points explaining US policy, but they made clear that they did not accept the validity of most of them. While they accepted the legitimacy of the state of Israel and conceded that states enjoy the right of self-defense, they did not see the Israeli military actions in Gaza as meeting that threshold. In addition, they argued that the United States is fueling Israel's military appetite by providing it with disproportionate force.

Comment

19. (C) Emotions are continuing to run high over the fighting in Gaza. We anticipate that we will continue to see sporadic demonstrations reflecting increased anger over the Israeli operations and perceived inaction on the part of the international community. Clearly anger is also growing over the USG's perceived pro-Israeli bias. While some demonstrators have voiced anti-American slogans, particular animus is now reserved for moderate Arab states, reflecting a trend seen elsewhere on the Arab Street. In this regard, it is telling that an Arabic proverb has gained currency in recent days: "The injustice from your own people is more bitter and hurts more than that from your enemies." End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>

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